



Fieldnotes for ABLE Staff

2007 Edition

Copyright
Commonwealth of
Pennsylvania 2007

File name:
fn07authenticmaterials.pdf

Complete publication at
[www.able.state.pa.us/
fieldnotes07](http://www.able.state.pa.us/fieldnotes07)

ABSTRACT

No-hands teaching: Student-created lessons based on authentic material

By Melissa Monti

Why on earth would a teacher turn lesson planning and classroom creation over to the students? Because, as anxiety provoking as it may be, it just makes good sense and good practice. The combined onus of responsibility and personal investment help to ensure student engagement. And, frankly, information that students provide to one another appears much more interesting and relevant than what comes from me, the teacher. The author asks this question in the opening of her article on student-created lessons using authentic materials and answers it with a recounting of a two-week classroom experiment turning over materials, activity development, and instruction to her students. Most remarkable of all, the materials were free or low-cost and are available from one source, the Federal Citizen Information Center.

Melissa Monti is the coordinator of the statewide K-12 Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Education Project, an initiative of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Until recently, she was a GED instructor in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She has also taught ESL and worked in workforce education at Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate 13. Melissa graduated from Temple University, where she received an Ed.M. in Adult Learning and Organizational Development in May 2005.

This publication is the product of a Workforce Investment Act Title II State Leadership grant to Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education. Opinions expressed are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education, or Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13; as such, no official endorsement should be inferred.

Articles may be distributed freely; however, please request permission from the editor to reprint in order to give proper credit to the authors and the project.

Please direct questions and report errors to Tana Reiff, Editor, tana_reiff@iu13.org

ARTICLE BEGINS NEXT PAGE

No-hands teaching: Student-created lessons based on authentic material

By *Melissa Monti*

Why would I as a teacher turn lesson planning and classroom creation over to the students in my classroom? Because, as anxiety provoking as it may be, it just makes good sense and good practice. The combined onus of responsibility and personal investment help to ensure student engagement. Frankly, information that students provide to one another appears much more interesting and relevant than what comes from me, the teacher. As I wrote in my 2006 Fieldnotes article “Administrator Perspectives on Integration of Learner Roles and Authentic Materials in the Adult Education Context,” in 2003, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) published the results of a five-year collaborative study by NCSALL, Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, Portland State University, Rutgers University, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee. In the results of that study, “Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom: A handbook for practitioners,” the authors, Erik Jacobson, Sophie Degener, and Victoria Purcell-Gates, not only define authentic and collaborative learning, but present clear evidence of and arguments for benefits to students. A key philosophical underpinning to their work is the belief that “the use of activities and materials that are drawn from the learner’s lives outside of school...*authentic or learner-contextualized* [materials] and that using *real life texts* for *real life purposes* provides students with an education that is meaningful and responds better to their individual needs.” It is teaching and learning that keeps on giving.

Unfortunately, it is not exactly efficient to spend large amounts of time collecting masses of authentic materials to use in the classroom. As many of us know from firsthand experience, many, if not most, adult education teachers do not have a stationary, dedicated classroom. Living out of one’s trunk and lugging all manner of items is a practical reality and is certainly something I try to minimize when possible. Therefore, when I discovered a catalog of real-world resources from Pueblo, Colorado, I not only recalled that address from many childhood hours of Saturday morning cartoon watching, but also was filled with a child’s enthusiasm for all the possibilities; that most of the materials were free or low-cost only added to my excitement. What is this compilation of resources? It is the Consumer Information Catalog from the Federal Citizens Information Center, of course!

Consumer catalog

It was about two years ago that I was browsing the rack of free materials for clients at the community-based organization in which my GED class was located when I noticed the thin, appealing-looking booklet. I was taking some information on local community resources to create a lesson plan and decided that it too might be useful. When I finally got

CONTINUED

a chance to glance through it some days later, I could not believe the range of pamphlets, booklets, worksheets, info packs, historical maps, and tip sheets! Most were \$1–\$2, if not free. I created a wish list and found the ordering information—a simple checklist—and wrote a quick check for about \$15, and forgot about it.

About three weeks later I received a large parcel in the mail from Pueblo, Colorado. Truthfully, once I got the parcel, packed with about 50 varied publications of all sorts, I had no idea what to do with the contents. I just knew 1) that it was a lot of very useful, hands-on material and 2) that I did not have the time to sort through, read, and create activities from each one. The parcel contents sat in a pile in a corner of my office for about six months. I glared at it occasionally. Finally, there came a day last spring when, for no good reason, I had some free time. In addition, we were preparing to move our offices and so I had to begin making critical decisions about what materials could go and what could stay. Rifling through the pile to weed out the “To Discard” items seemed impossible; every time I tried, I lamented all the wasted tip sheets, FAQs, and handbooks! I knew I needed to do something drastic or be done with them for good. So, with that in mind, I hauled them all into my classroom one day and spread them out on a table, an idea percolating.

When the students came in that day, I asked them to take some time to look through the pile and choose a topical item that interested them personally. Their assignment was to read the leaflet, handbook, map, workbook, or other product and think about what their classmates might want or need to know about the topic. Then I asked them to generate at least five questions from the material. The questions, I explained, were to be a range of at least true/false, multiple choice, short answer, or fill-in-the-blank. I told them I would review the activity sheet for clarity, accuracy, spelling, and readability and then would make copies of the handouts (questions and reading material) for their peers. Each student’s work would be featured on a separate day over a two to three weeks. They would have two weeks to prepare their assignments. The reactions of the students varied, as you might imagine, from enthusiastic to bored to nervous and reluctant to happily hardworking.

Diving in

The next two weeks were fraught with anxiety for many. Some students were conspicuously absent. Some students could not make up their minds about what topic they wanted to do and changed frequently. There were a few new students during that time that, surprisingly, seemed to jump right into the fire. There was obviously some nervousness, not only about creating a “good” lesson, but also about doing an in-class presentation. We worked through all of the concerns we could and I let them know that I had complete confidence in their abilities. In fact, there were to be no grades or other evaluation (not that I ever did formally grade their work) and my previewing their work would ensure we would catch any potential problems and avoid embarrassments. One or two of the lower-level reading students needed one-on-one help and worked intensively in class with me and with one or two classmates. Sherman was the student I was most concerned about; he read on a fourth-grade level and struggled with writing as well. It was difficult, but he picked a short booklet on medicine safety and focused on the section related to keeping a safe medicine cabinet. He and I read it together, sounding out each word and discussing what each one meant. In the

CONTINUED

end, he did a beautiful job creating an activity that all the students benefited from. By the time he presented his lesson, he was very proud and confident and had no problem reading his material aloud or introducing the activity to his peers. It was a well-used opportunity for growth for Sherman!

Extending the activity

In the end, all of the students did a wonderful job. Many conversations and discussions branched off the basic activity in class. While the students' questions were tests of basic knowledge and fact-finding skills, I made sure to ask more in-depth, reasoning-skill questions in class so that there would be a "stretch." Below are some examples of topical items that the class chose and a smattering of sample questions. The few items highlighted demonstrate the range of what was appealing to my class at that time. Using the Consumer Information Catalog provides almost limitless choices, as the offerings vary from season to season and students will always be interested in unique items.

1. From *Taking Control of Your Finances* (free and available in PDF)
 - What are the five things you should know about credit cards?
 - What Web site can you go to find out more about buying versus renting a home?
 - True or false: The FDIC will protect all of your money if it is in a bank.
2. From *Food Safety At Home – Fact sheet* (free and available in PDF)
 - List the four easy steps you can take to keep food from going bad.
 - It is recommended to use plastic cutting boards, not wooden. Why?
 - True or false: You don't need to use a food thermometer if you are sure your food is hot all the way through.
3. From *Fun Play, Safe Play* (free and available as a PDF)
 - Gross-motor and fine-motor are types of this kind of skill: _____
 - What are the four criteria by which toys are labeled?
 - Why do you think it might not be good idea to buy a toy for a three-year-old that is labeled for a six-year-old?

The above are three basic examples of articles and student-developed questions. There are countless other possibilities. Even the above items each included tens of other potential questions. Because we worked on these activities as a group, it was necessary to reproduce portions of the individual information sheets. Due to concerns about copyrighting and economy, I did not want to copy large booklets or pamphlets. In fact, I only reproduced items that were free and available to download from the Web site in PDF; however, there are many, many items that are lengthy and can be purchased from \$1–\$10 and higher. I also told the students that I preferred them to choose a section to focus on that could be photocopied on one or two sheets. They all seemed fine with that direction and, when necessary, we sat together and discussed what would make sense. I was also sure to make

CONTINUED

proper attribution on each activity sheet and photocopied article. I also provided copies of the entire Consumer Information Catalog for each student.

Valuable outcomes

In my opinion, the best outcome of the experiment was not that I had some reprieve from lesson development for a few short weeks or even that students got practice in reading, thinking, questioning, information seeking, or presenting; rather, it was the many topically related, student-led discussions we had following each activity. I think these exercises generated so much discussion because the students felt invested and interested in what they were learning. The topics rang true to them. The information was directly applicable to “where they live,” and that matters to adult students!

Perhaps the best example of this is one experience we all shared with a student named Lynn. Lynn came into class one day during this time saying that a man was stalking her. He was repeatedly placing obscene and harassing phone calls to her. Although she was not sure who it was, she thought she knew. As a class we discussed the word *harassment* and its connotations. We also talked about whether it was an experience others had shared and some offered ideas of how Lynn might handle the phone calls. During this time, the subject of tracing calls came up and I remembered that the phone book includes a page on telephone harassment and procedures for having calls traced. I asked Lynn if she would be willing to read that page and create an activity for the class. She was, and the next day we had a student-led lesson on how to work with the phone company to track phone calls. We were also able to discuss many other features of almost all local telephone books: emergency and evacuation routes (in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese) and procedures, weather notification stations, local and state government agency contact information, and information-line contact numbers. I am sure that most, if not all, students did not have previous knowledge of the multiple ways a simple telephone book can be useful to a family or individual.

My experiences using authentic materials have been overwhelmingly positive—even if I am not an “expert.” It does take some thinking about how to make them applicable, user-friendly, and “translatable,” but I think it is worth it. It is a way to get more bang for your buck—and your students will be learning even without knowing they are! It eliminates the question “When will I ever use this?” as they can see right away that it applies to their lives. In addition, if you use the Consumer Information Catalog you will also be providing a resource to them for the future. They might tuck it away for now, but one day they might open it up, look, and discover exactly where to go for answers.

You can view the catalog or request your own by going to www.pueblo.gsa.gov or by calling (888) 8 PUEBLO.

Sample listings

Some of the many tip sheets, articles, booklets, and pamphlets in the current catalog include:

- Restaurant and take-out safety
- Sleep disorders
- Get the facts on saving and investing

CONTINUED

- Apprenticeships: Career training, credentials—and a paycheck in your pocket
- Start smart: Money management for teens
- Caring for an aging loved one
- Americans with Disabilities Act: Questions and answers
- Diabetes recipes
- How to keep your heart healthy
- Managing chronic pain
- How to buy a home with a low down payment
- Energy savers: Tips on saving energy and money at home
- Building a better credit report
- 66 ways to save money
- A guide to business credit for women, minorities, and small businesses
- The civil war at a glance
- Welcome to the United States: A guide for new immigrants

I encourage you to try using authentic materials in your classroom. If you have not done so before and are hesitant about how to start, why not take the easy route and use information that your students are sure to appreciate and that all come from one source? In fact, make it even easier on yourself and have your students practice their skills by teaching each other. You will learn from them what they want and need to know. After all, they are the experts.

References

- Jacobson, E., Degener, S., and Purcell-Gates, V. (2003). "Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom: A handbook for practitioners." Cambridge, MA: NCSALL.
- Monti, M. (2006). "Administrator Perspectives on Integration of Learner Roles and Authentic Materials in the Adult Education Context." Harrisburg, PA: *Fieldnotes for ABLE Administrators, 2006 Edition*.
- Monti, M. (2004). "Workplace Instructional Development With Authentic Materials." Harrisburg, PA: *Fieldnotes for ABLE Staff, 2004 Edition*.